


# HOW TO START YOUR OWN STUDY GROUP IN PRISON

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND  
A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE  
ON USING READING GROUPS  
TO BUILD PRISONER  
UNITY AND POWER



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## Some of the Books We Use in our Study Group

*A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn

*From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans*, by John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr.

*The Almanac and Book of Facts*

*An African Latinx People's History of the United States*, by Paul Ortiz

*The African Slave Trade*, by Basil Davidson

*Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in 18th Century Virginia*, by Gerald Mullin

*Narratives of the Insurrections 1675-1690*, by Charles Andrews

*The San Francisco Bay View Newspaper*

## Steps to Starting Your Own Prison Study Group

*Editor's Note: The following are some suggestions on how one can start a study group on the inside, put together by one NC prisoner who has had some long-term success and experience with such a project, along with some of his personal reflections on how to facilitate such a group once it exists. Some of these specifics probably vary from facility to facility, from state to state, or whether you're in state or federal custody. There are also many other ways people on the inside have started such groups—sometimes it can be a formal approach with permission from the administration, as these steps suggest, and sometimes it is more clandestine, illicit, or informal.*

*Along similar lines, some prisoners in Texas have recently turned their cells into small "liberation libraries". Never forget: entire prison rebellions, that have shaken the system to its core (such as Attica!), have often begun with the small beginning of a group of trusted friends reading and studying together behind enemy lines. Find what works for you!*

### Step One: Knowing What You Can Do

Within the North Carolina policy and procedure manual for the Department of Adult Corrections (as it is now called) there is within Chapter A.0200 a Section E. concerning "the duties and positions of all prison management staff." Under this section you will see "unit manager." The important part is this: "A unit manager is allowed to implement a practice on their housing unit without the permission of the officer in charge (OIC)." That practice is not a rule or policy, it is only something done on that unit.

Therefore, you as a prisoner can request and make recommendations to the unit manager about practices on the unit that are unique to that unit alone. Knowing this can help you with the leverage to propose your idea.

## Step Two: Writing Your Proposal

This is where your time and effort come in. This is the dealmaker or breaker.

The art of proposal writing is to get what you want, need, or request without walking away empty-handed. So with that in mind, here are some suggestions:

- 1 – Make your proposal to the point without a lot of overtalk or unnecessary verbage. Keep it simple and don't be repetitive.
- 2- Understand what you want and explain how it is beneficial to the unit first, the prisoners second, and the prison as a whole third.
- 3- Show the format of your study group proposal, in an easy to read and comprehensive way.
- 4 – Show some form of knowledge in the field of study.
- 5 – Anticipate some questions and answer them within your proposal, like how many people will be in the group or class, how often and for how long you would meet, what goals to want to reach, how it helps keep down prison violence, etc.

## Step Three: Find a Supporter Within the Administrative Ranks

We as prisoners all should know the one or two people, in the higher ranks of the prison administration, who want to see us do well and succeed. So you must go and present your format and proposal to that person or persons to see how it comes across to them. But do not sell yourself short, by going to someone that always says yes. Find someone who is honest first of all, but has an open mind, and is fair in their opinion of staff and prisoners.

Even if your assistant unit manager is more for the prisoner than the

### *Lesson #3*

In 1655 in the state of Virginia, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Key, who was the daughter of a slave woman and a free Englishman from the Virginia House of Burgess sued the courts to be recognized as free.

Her argument was simple: In the colony of Virginia at this time in history a Christian could not be enslaved. She won her case. This was the first mixed woman to be voted free by the colony of the Virginia courts.

In 1655 how common was it to be mixed? That's the question I ask myself as I write this. As I look around the world now, being mixed or bi-racial is so common among the poor people of the world it is hardly as shocking as maybe it was in 1655. In fact it was so shocking then that in 1660, only five years later, the decision was repealed from law and the child of a free white man with property, money, and land, that came from the union of this man with a slave woman, was deemed by law to still be a slave. (This legal ruling allowed for the continuance of chattel slavery by inheritance, a fact required to perpetuate the slave economy.)

So, is it still so? That you are still what your mother is in America? Or is it that you are what you think you are until proven wrong? Something to think about.

If you are reading this then you are a poor person like me no matter your color. Wake up people!

### *Lesson #2*

In 1740 the slave codes were first enacted in South Carolina. Among other things drums were outlawed for slaves.

From the slave code of South Carolina, article 36:

And it is absolutely necessary to the safety of the province that all due care be taken to restrain negroes and other slaves.... from the using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes.

Even then, as it is now, the intent of the power structure was to keep the lines of communication closed. Because when large groups of people, who feel the same way, get together and start to communicate and build on new ideas and cause these ideas to become actions, then you have change on a broader scale. Look at the uprising after the George Floyd murder. Social media opened up the lines of communication and even prisoners like myself had a platform to express ourselves.

So now do you hear the drums, horns, and other loud instruments of our ancestral past, in communication with out souls? If you don't know what that feeling is, it should feel like a desire to do better for yourself and those around you, a need to speak out against oppression and tyranny on all levels big or small.

But most of all it should come out in a change that is visible, that helps better the lives of those around you. All you have to remember is that once upon a time it was against the law to even communicate with your fellow man, because whenever the poor people within a kingdom learn to come together in order to find a better way of life, the elite of that kingdom will always criminalize their actions in order to keep the poor downpressed and at odds with each other, no matter their color.

unit manager, you need support from an administrative body. Always be prepared to compromise, but never become a puppet of the administration.

## **Step Four: Figure Out Your Content and Structure**

This deals with what the study group or social club is studying or meeting for.

You must be able to present your content in a concise way that shows your knowledge and ability to teach and not lose the focus of the group.

For example, if the study group is for radical history, you need to know and be able to explain, what you already know about it, how you plan to get your material, how will the subject be a help to this group or the prison as a whole, in what ways would this help prisoners as a whole, and what would you need from the prison to achieve a successful outcome.

You have to know things of this nature in order to push the agenda you're setting out for.

## **Step Five: Getting it Done**

The achievements of your study group or club depends on you and your drive, and how badly you want the success. Nothing worth having is easy. So you have to be prepared to for the naysayers, and be ready to accept criticism. Ask yourself right now, am I able to adapt and overcome the hurdles that will arise.

So if your answer is yes, then please read on and feel free to use the examples if relevant.

### *Example A: Introduction Letter*

I, Mr. or Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ Pous # \_\_\_\_\_ am writing to you in

hopes that you or one of the administrators here at \_\_\_\_\_ would consider my request and allow me to present my proposal for a study group or social club. Your feedback and concerns will be taken with the highest regards.

Thanks in Advance,

(Your signature and OPUS #)

### *Example B: Sample Proposal*

(Note : Send this to your unit managers, warden of programs, warden of custody programs supervisor or director of programs, and the secretary of prisons in Raleigh)

This is a proposal for a non-religious study group or social club. We the prisoners at \_\_\_\_\_, in close custody have no meaningful way to study other forms of history or political science. Open communication is key in helping us as prisoners to not have violent situations, among ourselves and among staff and officers.

(The following is specific to North Carolina)

The Department of Adult Corrections policy and procedure manual section .0200 Chapter A provides for the powers and duties of administrators. The authority of a unit manager is of importance here. A unit manager is allowed to implement a practice on their housing unit without the permission of the officer in charge (OIC).

Knowing this, I ask that you allow this request to proceed, and begin a program that is unique to your unit alone. This study group would be beneficial to your unit because it would set your unit apart from others, by allowing us the prisoners to teach and interact with each other in a productive and educational way. Peer mediation is proven to be a great way to keep down prison violence and raises the morale of the prison population as a whole.

This study group would need the administration to allow for meetings once a week for 45 minutes to one hour. For the prisoner instructor to be

## **Examples from Previous Study Group Sessions**

The following are a few of the “history lesson” prompts used in these study groups, as an example.

### *Lesson #1*

In 1691 the definition of white was given to people of the colonies of North America, and guess what? That definition was not extended to indentured servants, those who came from western and eastern European countries to work for their freedom in the New World, as America was called at the time.

So have you caught my point yet? That the hate groups—like the KKK, Sons of Confederate Soldiers, White Citizens Council, later on the Aryan Nation, Aryan Brotherhood, Nazi Lowriders—all of these groups are the descendants of the poor whites of this country. So once again we see how the government separates the poor in this country and puts them at odds with each other so the real tricks of the upper class aren’t seen.

Think about this. The preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America starts off by saying,

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

- 1) “A more perfect union” amongst the richest Americans
- 2) “Establish justice” as they see justice to fit their plans not how justice is written in the letter of the law.
- 3) Here is the biggest catchphrase that the world misses: “And to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...”

This clearly means that if you are not a part of the upper classes by birth or one of their descendants then you aren’t a part of the establishment that wrote the rules (and that they break everyday).

can complain about things and not do anything to change the situation which they are in.

So I ask those of you who have not been active in changing our condition for the better: what are you here for? Is there nothing in your life worth fighting for? Every religious book says that "Faith without works" is dead. George Jackson said that revolution without bloodshed is only talk.

Yet so many claim to understand energy and the universe and so many say that they are in tune with the ancestors and the occult. So do me a favor. Out of respect, ask the ancestors how they feel about the state of the community and the village? But most of all ask the ancestors, do they feel like their sacrifices were worth the outcome we have now?

And if you or anyone else gets a "positive vibe," then I am sorry cause that is not your tribe nor is it your ancestors if you get that. So that means you are not tuned in. We all will pass over from the world one day and we will all be held to account for the things we did right and for what was done wrong. So why fear what has to happen anyway?

I can tell you that there is no people in the history of mankind who changed their situation by just sitting around and talking good and sounding good. There had to be acts of force, there had to be suffering before ease came about. So this being known, and those of you like me who have suffered your whole life, I ask you why aren't you active in the change?

These writings and discussions I have inside of these prison walls are to prepare the soldiers that are able to come home one day to take the action to lead to change, to effect one life in their own lifetime so that their own legacy won't be looked upon in shame and disgrace. Communication is what has to be revived within the family, the community, and the people as a whole. Because selfishness and materialism have helped to ruin the people and caused them to look for a savior before they attempt to save themselves.

allowed to go from block to block on the unity, when it is the next block's turn to be involved. This time for meetings would take place during the regular recreation period so as to not interfere with any other operations on the unit.

The group would consist of not less than four and no more than seven prisoners as to not have too many prisoners out at once. As a pilot program, it would only be for four prisoners, the instructor and three others.

The group would only last a month within each block, but the pilot would be only 2 weeks per block, to gauge the rate of participation and to show structure and to increase accountability of participants, and to observe the interaction among participants. The group is voluntary.

The group materials would be provided by the instructor and by an outside publishing house that specializes in history and political science. Typeprint materials as well as the GTL tablet would be utilized.

I humbly submit this request proposal in hopes to start something beneficial for this housing unit and begin a trend of leadership and accountability among the prisoners on this unit.

With Kindest Regards,

(Name and OPUS #)

## Reflections from My Own Study Group Efforts

*By Bigg-O*

The study group that I lead is completely voluntary. We meet during our recreation time. I usually open the group with a question about what they may know about an event or era in history, or if they know of their genealogy and who may be or who may have actually been a famous or well-known family member of theirs.

This usually gets people to open up, and at this point is where I infuse a story or ask another question about history. I sometimes get a reply that's negative, and that's when I give the group some hidden facts of history and our culture, or if I have a latino or Hispanic brother around I'll ask him history of his people.

The reason for this is simple. This is done to show that knowing your true history is something that brings about pride in your heritage and makes you want the best for your people. Most of all it breaks down the self-hate that we experience without even knowing it.

I make this group as interactive as I can. I express the need to allow brothers to open up about how they feel and or view the world as it is through their eyes and experience. Also there has to be an understanding, within the group, that nothing said is wrong or dumb, that everyone's point matters, and I make sure everyone has a chance to speak their piece.

The goal of this study is to teach a new way of seeing oneself, to help brothers see that being intelligent or educated isn't lame or weird, as a lot of the younger brothers have been made to believe. And most of all, it is to bring about unity that is needed to bring about change in the prisons of NC, and to invoke the spirit of the warrior within, so that he will fight for his family and his community, if and when he is set free one day.

In my opinion the best part about enlightening my group about their history—either African, Afro-American, Latinx or any forms of the diaspora studies—the best part is when I see the topic take root, and when I see the members of the group reteach what we just discussed to others

in their peer circle. It lets me know that I am getting through to the group, and just maybe their mind is changing into a political mindset, instead of the reactionary state of mind that a lot of brothers are currently in. My focus is to ignite the proactive thought process that allows for the mind of the revolutionary to grow into direct action, instead of just talk.

I always ask the question, "How many of you want change?" And at times I get "No" as an answer, or I get a few people who want to make a change but don't have ways or means of effecting change. So as an exercise in my group I use a format I call "Expressions of Self." This is where I pick a group member and direct him to speak upon any topic that he would like to see change around. The catch is that "expressions of self" is done on the fly—at a moment's notice it could be your turn. I think at times it helps but at times it is hard cause some guys think there's a right answer and there isn't any right or wrong answers. The only thing a group member needs to do is be able to defend his position and thought process, which in essence will prepare him for the backlash of those who oppose his views.

Because I am the grandson and great nephew of active members of the Black Liberation Army, and the great grandson of the only African-American woman in the city of Lincolnton, NC to have a residential street named in her honor, her being the reason for the city's creation of the Housing Authority, I was reared differently than most of my peer group. Being from the west coast and having West Indian blood ties to the islands, brought out my need for change, for rebellion against the established government. My hunger for active resistance was stoked into a fire that still burns bright almost 50 years later.

When you know and understand where you come from you can always know where you are going and where you want to go. But most of all you know where you need to be to help. In my lifetime I've always put forth the effort to help, save, and educate the people, even at the cost of my own freedom. My position has always remained the same to help those whom can not help themselves.

We all have our outlooks and opinions on life, and how we feel our lives should be. How many of us are active in changing our conditions for the better? It has always bothered me and deeply saddens me how people